GIFTS FOR GADGET LOVERS

Have You Been A Naughty Or Nice Little Gearhead?

There has never been a better time to be a gadget lover. Thanks to wireless technologies, cheaper-than-ever storage, wide availability of color LCDs, and other advancements, electronic gear can do more for us than ever. Increasingly, portable devices are becoming multifunction machines, taking the place of several other gadgets. At the same time, home electronics provide better sound, higher resolution, and more features than ever.

Here's our holiday roundup of gear fit for those gearheads on your shopping list. These gadgets are new, fresh, sexy, and superbly cool in function. Whether you're just hunting for gift ideas or buying for a friend, family member, or that special someone, you're sure to find a piece of gear that'll please.

Photo & Video Gear

Creative DiVi CAM 428

This 4-in-1 gadget is just the thing for the geek on the go. The DiVi CAM 428 (www.creative.com) is an affordable multiformat recorder that works as a digital camera, video recorder, voice recorder, and MP3 player. In video mode it captures movies at a respectable 640 x 480 resolution at 30fps. As a digital camera, it grabs 4MP images and can optionally interpolate those to a whopping 8MP.

The built-in LCD rotates so you can shoot pictures or movies from almost any angle. There's only 32MB of built-in memory, which will certainly fill up fast, but you can add a 1GB SD card to store more pictures, movies, and music. Perhaps best of all, the suggested retail price for this versatile machine is just $199.

Canon PowerShot SD550 Digital Elph

Every photo geek wants a digital camera that packs the most megapixels possible, but carrying a large, expensive digital SLR around isn't always feasible. The PowerShot SD550 ($489; www.canon.com) crams 7.1MP into a small, attractive curved case, so you'll be able to take spontaneous images anywhere. The 3X optical zoom (4X digital) is useful for wide and telephoto images with a respectable 37 to 111mm range. The SD550 is meant as a point-and-shoot camera, so photogs who want to take exacting control of images may be disappointed by the manual mode, but the camera can take VGA-quality video (up to 60fps at 320 x 240), and there are numerous smart shooting modes that optimize the aperture and shutter speed for shooting children at play, portraits, nighttime images, and other scenes.

Mattel Vidster

In 1988, Fisher-Price released the PixelVision video camera for kids to record grainy, black-and-white movies on audio

tapes. The toy developed a cult following among filmmakers and technophiles. Today, Mattel's Vidster (www.mattel.com) is the kids' video toy that adults will want to play with. It's an $80 video camera that's meant to keep tiny, grubby hands off the grownups' camera. The specs aren't impressive (it's a toy, remember), but the Vidster's technical limitations add to its charm. The Vidster stores six to eight minutes of 15fps video on a 32MB SD card (which you can upgrade for longer movies). There's no optical zoom, but there's an LCD. You might want to hack it or enter your creation in a local film festival, but if you find one under the tree, contain your glee; it might be for your child, not you.

Communications

Samsung SCH-i730

When it's time to upgrade an aging mobile phone, your favorite geek will want to do it right. The Samsung SCH-i730 ($700; www.samsung.com) is an impressive Windows Mobile smartphone that combines PDA and phone features into a sleek unit. The phone supports five wireless protocols, including Wi-Fi and Bluetooth. You can chat using the speakerphone or a wireless headset, and when you want Internet access, you can use the slide-out thumb keyboard or a Bluetooth keyboard to access the Web from any Wi-Fi hotspot without using cellular minutes. The phone, which works with Verizon's cellular network, also plays MP3s and videos and includes pocket versions of Word, Excel, and Outlook.

RCA Cell Docking System

You are chilling at home when the phone rings. Not your landline phone,

the cell phone. But where is it? The RCA Cell Docking System (communications.rca.com) can help out; it combines your landline and mobile phones into one convenient handset. The docking station connects to your phone line and your cell phone, so you can use the system's handset to answer and place calls on either phone line. The combination makes it easy to use your free cellular minutes for outgoing calls all weekend long, but still have a phone in easy reach when mom calls on the landline. You can even use the docking system to make three-way conference calls using the mobile and landline phones. The $150 unit works with 60 mobile phone models from Nokia, Sony Ericsson, and Motorola.

On The Go

Garmin Quest 2

A good GPS receiver can make the difference between getting to your destination on time and driving around in circles for hours. Wherever you are, Garmin's Quest 2 GPS unit ($699; www.garmin.com) will keep you from getting lost. It comes preloaded with maps for all of North America, so you won't have to load it with new maps when you're getting ready to travel to a new city. The Quest includes a color display and voice-promoted navigation. There's 140MB of extra memory, so you can load in topographic, maritime, or other specialized maps. At just 5.5 ounces, the unit is small enough to carry while geocaching, and it comes with a suction cup mount for the car, where you'll want to leave it most of the time. When it's time to go home, a single button will show you the way from anywhere.

TomTom Go 300/700

The TomTom Go series is another splendid GPS navigation option. The Go 300 ($699; www.tomtom.com) shows where you are and where you're headed using beautiful first-person color graphics. Voice navigation tells you how to get where you're going in your choice of 30 languages and 50 voices. The Go 300 comes loaded with the entire U.S. road system, and you can plan your trip by defining multiple waypoints and destinations along the way. The Go 700 ($899) adds Canadian roads and lets you make hands-free calls using your Bluetooth mobile phone. You can juice the features of either model by subscribing to Plus Services, which include real-time traffic information, information about the location of traffic-monitoring cameras, weather updates, and downloadable city maps.

Palm LifeDrive

The LifeDrive Mobile Manager ($499; www.palm.com) is a tool for those of us who need to stay connected but don't want to tote a full-sized laptop everywhere. This sleek gadget does most of what a laptop can do but fits in one hand. You can fill its 4GB hard drive with Word, Excel, PDF, and PowerPoint documents, video files, and digital pictures, all of which you can view on the unit's large color screen. The LifeDrive can also play MP3s, record voice messages, and, thanks to Wi-Fi and Bluetooth support, access email and the Web from hotspots. When you're on vacation and have filled up your digital camera's memory card, you can copy your photos to the LifeDrive to free up space on the camera.

Mobile Music & Video

Walkman Digital Music Player

More than 25 years after the Walkman cassette player hit the streets, Sony (www.sonystyle.com) has reincarnated the

brand, this time as an MP3 player. This sweet-looking player features an organic electroluminescent display that blends in with the case almost seamlessly. It's available in 6GB (model NW-A1000) and 20GB (model NW-A3000) versions. Besides the sleek look, the neo-Walkman includes cool ways to listen to your tunes, including a Favorite Shuffle mode that selects from your 100 most-listened-to tunes and Time Machine Shuffle that gets in a groove by playing songs from a particular year. An Artist Link function suggests artists and bands that are closely linked to the genre you're currently listening to. Prices had yet to be set at press time, but this Walkman gives a fresh look to the world of MP3 players.

Sling Media Slingbox

We reviewed the Sling Media Slingbox last month (page 23), but we loved it so much (we gave it a perfect rating), we had to include it here. The Slingbox ($249; www.slingbox.com) lets you watch your TV from anywhere. At home just connect it to your cable box or DVR and your broadband Internet connection. You can then watch shows on a computer anywhere else with an Internet connection—in the den, at a Wi-Fi-enabled coffee shop, at work, etc. If you travel often, this is a great way to time- and place-shift your favorite TV shows. Even if you don't

A Bite Out Of The Apple

Apple Computer (store.apple.com) is a perennial source for drool-worthy hardware, and its recent releases are no exception.

If it's an MP3 player you're after, the diminutive iPod nano weighs 1.5 ounces, has a color screen, and can run 14 hours between charges. Besides playing MP3s and music from iTunes, the nano can display digital pictures as part of an audio slideshow. It also adds to the iPod line a world clock, stopwatch, and combination lock function to keep Hoobastank-haters from messing with the controls. The nano is available in a 2GB version ($199; about 500 songs) and a 4GB version ($249; about 1,000 songs).

If you're still suffering with the hockey puck-shaped mouse that came with your Mac, it's time to move on. Apple's Mighty Mouse ($49) is a great-looking and innovative mouse. Instead of a scroll wheel, it features a scroll ball (think tiny track ball) that lets you move around documents in any direction. The two invisible top buttons and two side buttons are touch-sensitive, providing a welcome departure from the one-button mice that have been the Mac standard since 1984.

For big spenders there's really no question which Apple product to covet: the 30-inch Cinema HD display. This widescreen monitor has a monster 2,560 x 1,600 resolution, as well as a monster $2,999 price. If that breaks your budget, we're confident the Mac-loving geek in your life wouldn't balk at the $799 20-inch or the $1,499 23-inch versions. The monitor (any size) includes two FireWire and two USB 2.0 ports for easy access to connect your digital camera, iPod, and other peripherals.

Dropping from the Apple tree soon, though certainly not before year's end, will be new Macs running on Intel processors. Apple is expected to release Intel-powered versions of its high-end computers sometime next year, followed by lower-end Macs, such as the Mac mini and iMac. Although you won't find an Intel-inside Mac stuffed in your stocking this year, the end of December and January is always a great time to grab deals on good, old PowerPC Macintosh systems. Keep your eyes peeled for post-holiday buys, especially on consumer-oriented models such as the Mac mini and iBook line. ▲

travel, the Slingbox can turn your laptop at home into a portable DVR.

Home Entertainment

Samsung Twin-Tray DVD Recorder

Your old DVD-VCR combo player might as well be a Stone Age relic. The Samsung DVD-TR520 twin-tray DVD recorder (www.samsung.com) will bring new love to the living room. At $450, it may be the first affordable dual-tray consumer DVD burner. It can copy—excuse us, back up—a two-hour DVD in as little as 20 minutes with the touch of a single button. It supports DVD-RAM, -R, and -RW formats (but not +R/+RW varieties, nor dual-layer DVDs). The recorder's auto-fit function lets it detect the remaining space on the destination disc and choose the optimal recording mode to make it fit while preserving video quality. You can record TV shows directly to disc or use the DV input to transfer footage to DVD from your MiniDV camcorder.

JVC DR-DX5S

Another option for the living room is the JVC DR-DX5S, which combines a 250GB hard drive digital video recorder, DVD burner, and MiniDV recorder into one machine. The magic is that it lets you move data between any of the three media. For example, you can record a TV show to the hard drive and burn it to DVD. Or you could copy a home movie from your MiniDV camcorder to the hard drive for editing and then save the edited version to DVD. The DR-DX5S ($1,500; www.jvc.com) records and plays back DVD-RAM and DVD-R/-RW formats and can play DVD-Video and compact disc formats. With a full complement of connectors, including FireWire input and component output, this machine could be the centerpiece of your home theater system.

Sony MDR-DS4000

From PlayStation 2 to the iPod, fun technology tends to be loud. Sony's MDR-DS4000 wireless headphones ($190; www.sonystyle.com) let you rock out without annoying your parents, spouse, neighbors, or anyone else around. The digital infrared system provides hiss-free sound up to 33 feet from the wireless base station (although not into the next room; the headphones need line-of-sight transmission). The unit weighs only 11 ounces, which is light enough for extended gaming or listening sessions. They support 5.1-channel surround sound and are compatible with Dolby Digital, Dolby Pro Logic II, and DTS encoding technologies. When you don them, they automatically turn on, and when you're done, just put the headphones on the base station, and they'll automatically recharge for next time.

Just Plain Useful Stuff

Podzilla Gadget Bag

If you or your favorite gadget lover are already straining under the load of a half dozen or more portable electronic gizmos, perhaps more gadgets isn't the answer. Instead, a way to organize them all is in order. The Podzilla Gadget Bag from Roadwired ($69.95; www.roadwired.com) holds a camera, MP3 player, portable game, and GPS, plus every cable, cord, charger, battery, adapter, and other accessory they might need along the way. The versatile nylon bag includes more than 20 compartments and pockets, and you can wear it as a waist pack on your belt or use its shoulder strap. The bag is fully padded, and elastic organizers and built-in bungees keep accessories in place and out of harm's way. There's even a secret pocket to stash your cash or keys.

Retro LED Digital Watch

We love shopping at ThinkGeek.com, a site that's rife with stuff geeks would love, such as a USB microscope and a Swiss Army knife with a built-in USB drive. But our favorite new gadget at ThinkGeek.com is an old gadget: an LED wristwatch ($85) that's similar to the watches proto-geeks were wearing in the 1970s. When Seiko introduced liquid-crystal display watches in 1979, the glow of LED timepieces quickly became obsolete. This watch lets you revel in the joys of good old tech; it glows with red seven-element LEDs set against a chrome or gunmetal finish. (If you prefer something more obfuscated, ThinkGeek.com also sells a watch that displays the time in binary.) ▲

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